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TEGNÉR'S *GERDA*

For every student of Swedish literature it is a matter of deep regret that the poem *Gerda* was never finished, for the theme must have suggested to Tegnér much that was vital to his ideal of poetry and of life. The fact that in his old age Tegnér turned back to this theme which he had begun over twenty years before (1820), proves that the poet thought well of his work and therefore had never entirely relinquished his purpose to complete it. His biographer, Böttiger,¹ says that Tegnér considered *Gerda* as his favorite poem (*älsklingsdikt*), and when we remember Tegnér's modesty and his tendency to underrate his own works (even his *Frithiofssaga*), we may be justified in the belief that if in his last days he had been granted the strength to complete this work upon which his heart was set, he would have given to the world a poem equal in beauty and in profundity of thought to the *Frithiofssaga*.

Indeed, the fragment *Gerda* is one of those literary torsos which suggest the outlines of a master-piece. It is, therefore, an important task to analyse the literary features of this work, if we are to have any adequate conception of the poem as Tegnér intended it to be in its completed form. The question naturally first arises why the legend of Axel Hvide and Gerda should have so attracted Tegnér as to induce him to write a poem which was to hold his interests thruout so long a period of his life and to which he himself attached so much importance. To this question I shall in the following analysis endeavor to suggest an answer, which I offer, however, only as a tentative solution based upon the poet's natural proclivities and literary associations.

In *Gerda* the main theme consists in the favorite thesis of the Romanticists, viz., the struggle between Christianity and Paganism. In connection with Gerda's conversion to Christian-

¹ Esaias Tegnér's *Samlade Skrifter*, Stockholm, 1893, I, p. 470.

ity the poet was, according to Schück and Warburg,² also to have treated the great question of "renunciation in love," just as in his *Axel* (1822) and in his *Frithiofssaga* (1825). But since the ideal of self-abnegation is essential to the Christian religion, we may believe that in *Gerda*, just as in the *Frithiofssaga*, the love-theme must have been secondary to the great question at stake, which in reality was the motif of the poem, viz., the conversion to Christian ideals.

We know³ that even before the appearance of Oehlen-schläger's *Haakon Jarl* in 1807, Tegnér had hoped to give dramatic treatment to the great conflict between Christianity and Paganism, and that he had even begun a tragedy (i.e., *Blot Sven*) upon this subject. However, he abandoned his project, no doubt because he realized that he was a poet rather than a dramatist and therefore could not treat this theme in such dramatic form as might favorably compare with Oehlen-schläger's *Haakon Jarl*. Nevertheless, he intended⁴ to return

² Cf. Schück och Warburg, *Illustrerad Svensk Litteraturhistoria*, Stockholm, 1897, II, p. 706: "Liksom Frithiof och Axel skulle äfven den hafva behandlat försakelse i kärlek."

³ Letter to Martina von Schwerin, Lund, Oct. 4, 1821; also his letter to G. F. Åkerhjelm, Jan. 22, 1826.

⁴ "Möjligtvis återkommer jag en gång dertill;" letter to Martina von Schwerin, Lund, Oct. 4, 1821.

Cf. also his letter (1842) to Brinkman, in which he states that *Gerda* treats of the relation between Christianity and Paganism in continuation of the theme already expounded in the canto *Försoningen* of the *Frithiofssaga*: "Där Frithiof slutar, vidtar Gerda. Frågan är om striden mellan kristendom och hedendom, såväl i slutet af F. som i början af Gerda."

It seems probable that the reason why Tegnér laid *Gerda* aside was because this theme (i.e., the conversion thesis) was amply covered by the *Frithiofssaga* to which he accordingly devoted his whole attention. To be sure, the loss of his manuscript *Jätten Finn* (cf. letter to J. Adlerbeth, 1822) interfered with Tegnér's resolution to complete the cycle of poems entitled *Helgonabacken*, but there is no evidence that Tegnér conceived of *Jätten Finn* as an original part of his *Gerda*. In 1825 he wrote Martina von Schwerin that he was working upon a poem entitled *Helgonabacken eller Minnen af Lund* (according to Böttiger, Tegnér also used the preposition *från*), which was to contain much that reflected his own personal relations. The *Frithiofssaga* was completed in this year (1825) and no doubt the *Frithiofssaga*, especially *Afskedet*, also reflects the poet's personal relations to Martina von Schwerin (cf. Otto Sylwan, "Tegnér's *Frithiofssaga*," *Edda*, X, 4, 1919, p. 220 f.).

to this theme and did so later in his two poems, the *Frithiofssaga* and *Gerda*, both of which he began about the year 1819.

The fact that Tegnér changed the title of his work from *Helgonabacken eller Minnen från Lund* to *Gerda* indicates that the poet realized that his work was not merely a lyric poem representing a series of episodes in connection with the folk legend, but that it was in reality an epic poem, telling the story of Gerda and her conversion to Christianity; just as the *Frithiofs-saga* was an epic poem, telling the story of Frithiof's life and his conversion to Christianity (i.e., to Christian ideals).

Both *Gerda* and the *Frithiofssaga* were based upon national (i.e., Scandinavian) legends, both were love stories and both had as the basis of their conception the conversion thesis, i.e., the conversion of a heathen heart to Christian ideals, which in a conventional sense belonged in general to the Romantic School but in its ulterior and spiritual sense belonged in particular to Tegnér, as the expounder of Christian ideals in poetic form. Both *Gerda* and the *Frithiofssaga* were religious as well as Romantic poems, the product of Tegnér's literary genius at the zenith of his strength and inspiration. Therefore, it is not surprising that the literary features of the *Frithiofssaga* throw much light upon the nature of *Gerda*, and I shall have occasion to interpret in *Gerda* much which seems to have a literary and spiritual affinity with the *Frithiofssaga*.

The year 1820, when Tegnér turned from *Gerda* to complete his *Frithiofssaga*, was one of joyful hopes for the future. In his poem *Sången* (1819) Tegnér says:

Den gyllne lyran skall ej klinga
Om kval, dem själf jag diktat har,
Ty skaldens sorger äro inga,
Och sångens himmel evigt klar.

Certainly this joyful tone was fully preserved in the poem introductory to *Gerda* (i.e., *Jätten Finn*), where exactly the same spirit of burlesque humor appears as in the *Frithiofssaga*.⁵ Nor

⁵ Cf., for instance, the description of King Ring's embassy and his suit for Ingeborg's hand, the wrestling bout between Frithiof and Atle, Frithiof's acrobatic feats in *Isfarten* and in *Frithiof på hafvet*;

is there anywhere in the fragment any evidence of that "anlag för vemod och tungsinnighet" which characterises both Frithiof and Ingeborg; Tegnér seems to have kept thruout the poem "the eternally clear heaven of song."

Just as in the first canto of the *Frithiofssaga* (*Frithiof och Ingeborg*), an idyllic tone is likewise reflected in the first canto of *Gerda* where the poet introduces us into the primitive and Utopian habitat⁶ of the giantess. The sentimentality of the *Frithiofssaga* is lacking, but the same Rousseauian atmosphere of primitive civilization, undisturbed by the conventions of modern society, is represented with far greater directness and simplicity. If the influence of St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* is present in the canto *Frithiof och Ingeborg*, as Sylwan suggests (*ibid.*, p. 214), then this influence is still more clearly in evidence in the description of Gerda's home, where all nature serves

Som en mård han flög
uti masten opp,
och der satt han hög
och såg ned från topp.

Otto Sylwan ("Tegnér's *Frithiofssaga*," *Edda*, X, 4, 1919, p. 220 ff.) attributes this spirit of burlesque humor to the influence of Wieland. No doubt Tegnér owed something to Wieland especially for his inspiration in portraying the graceful and the sensual features of love; cf. his reference to Wieland in his poem *Vid en borgarflickas graf* (1804). But the tendency to burlesque humor was undoubtedly native also to Tegnér, as is shown, for instance, in his poem *Eskulap* (1804) or in *Halkan* (1819) or in *Hammerspik* (1815). Tegnér's good humor may also be detected in his poems *Jorden och årstiderna*, *Förlofvade och gifta* of 1806.

⁶ In the description of the subterranean caverns (*bergets jättesalar*) with their treasures Tegnér indulges in that love of splendor which characterizes especially his *Frithiofssaga*. Before describing these wonderful treasures he says:

Underliga ting att se
voro der, och många de.

just as in *Frithiof hos Angantyr* he says:

der mycket var att skåda,
som Frithiof ej sett förr.

Then follows in both poems a detailed analysis of the wonderful and beautiful things with which the chamber is equipped and which fill the guest with a sense of admiration and awe.

man in absolute love and harmony; even the wild beasts are tamed⁷ and man without effort wrests from earth the fruits of nature. Tegnér again utilized the Utopian theme in his *Frithiofssaga* when Frithiof (*Afskedet*) depicts for Ingeborg their new home in the South where the Garden of Eden is to be restored amid the ruins of Ancient Greece.

In his Romantic fervor the poet seems, however, to have transgressed the limits which he had set for Gerda as an unsophisticated child of nature. Gerda's entirely concrete and objective religion is hardly compatible with that subjective Neo-Platonic doctrine of the Romanticists, which identifies God with nature. Yet the reason she gives for sleeping in the tree-top is that there she is nearer to heaven and its divine inspiration. Thus, a primitive Utopian ideal is blended with a spiritual sentiment characteristic of the Romantic philosophers:

Friare jag andas der,
ty det himmelska är när,
och de stora tankar stiga
opp ur det oändeliga,
och den gamla Natten ser
vänligt på sin dotter ner.

Evidently the poet could not resist the temptation to glorify thru Gerda this divine inspiration which he himself felt in communion with nature. The serenity of nature at even-tide inspires the poet with immortal thoughts (just as it does Gerda); at such moments heaven is nearer ("det himmelska är när") and man receives the influx of the Infinite ("och de stora tankar stiga opp ur det oändeliga"), just as Tegnér says, for instance, in *Efter talets slut vid Gustaf Adolfsfesten* (1832):

7

Längre fram bland höga lindar
sprang en hjord af tama hindar;
tama elgkor deribland
slickade på Gerdas hand.

Det gifves stundar i ett jordiskt lif,
helst sedan dagen slutat⁸ af sitt klf
 och söft sin korta fröjd, sin korta smärta,
 då menskan hvilar invid *nattens hjerta*
 och *högre tankar, bättre känslor* slå
 sin rot i hjertan, som dem ej försmå.

In this *philosophic* contemplation of nature (alien to Gerda's untutored mind) the influence of Young's *Night Thoughts* (1743) is plainly evident.

In the *Frithiofssaga* the Utopian ideal was merely incidental, inasmuch as it had no essential bearing upon the motif of the poem, i.e., Frithiof's conversion to the precepts of the Christian religion. But in *Gerda* the life of primitive virtue and simplicity was synonymous with Gerda's religion and therefore represented a most vital factor in the motif of the poem. Evidently the legendary Gerda assumed in Tegnér's mind a symbolic figure identical with that of Svea, as she once was in all the glory of her heathen health, strength and virtue. Gerda, therefore, incorporates all the ancient virtues of the Swedish race.

Furthermore, it is evident that in *Gerda*, as in *Svea* (1811), the poet availed himself of the Utopian ideal as a patriotic appeal for the moral regeneration of the Swedish nation; a Romantic theme became thus utilized for national ends. Just as in *Svea* the poet had depicted the degeneration of the national character, due to the contamination of modern social influences, and had lamented the loss of that primitive virtue which had raised Sweden to a great military and cultural nation, so too in *Gerda* he depicts (in the mouth of Gerda) the cowardly, hypocritical and sickly race whose ancestors had been the heroes of the sagas and fit companions of the Gods.

⁸ Cf. the elegy *Elof Tegnér* (1815):

Och då och då jag dikta vill ett qvåde,
 * * * * *
helst sedan qvällen spänt sitt flor kring bergen
 och himlens stjernor spegla sig i sjön.

and *Fridsröster* (1808):

Qvällen är med friden slägt.

In *Svea* he says:

Jag älskar dig ej, tid,
som smilar öfver oss i falsk och veklig frid.
Mig gläder stormens sus och fädrens stora minnen;
jag älskar deras mod och deras höga sinnen,
då Nordens son ej än tog andras seder an
och njöt hvad jorden gaf, och tålte som en man.
Bort med den falska konst, som sinnets kraft förvekar,
och flärdens tomma prål och yppighetens lekar!—

as in *Gerda* he says:

och ett starkt och klarsint slägte
fädrens fria jord betäckte
och från slagfält och från våg
djerft till djerfva gudar såg.⁹
Nu en matt och sjuklig lära,
utan merg och utan ära,
smyger som en feber i
Nordens kropp, nyss sund och fri,
blott försonar, blott förenar,
talar frid och svaghet menar,
af allt stort och kraftigt glömsk,
gråtmild, hycklande och lömsk.

Altho Gerda's words have reference to the Christian religion which the heathen Norsemen regarded as a cowardly and contemptible doctrine that undermined the primitive heathen virtues, yet it is clear that Tegnér here had the same thought in mind as in *Svea*, viz., the degeneration of the Swedish national

⁹ Cf. these four verses in *Gerda* with the following in *Svar på Atterboms inträdestal i svenska akademien* (1840):

Der bodde fordom i det höga Norden
från hedenhös en kraftig ätt,
ömtålig om sin frihet och sin rätt,
med hårda händer och med hårda sinnen,
och öfver vågor, öfver dal och slätt
förblödde deras vilda strider.

In the poetic expression of this ideal, viz. the primitive virtue of the Swedish race, Tegnér reflects the sentiments of Geijer's *Manhem* (1811) which to a large degree served him as a model for his *Svea*; cf., for instance, the opening verses of *Manhem*:

Det var en tid, det bodde uti Norden
en storsint ätt, beredd för frid som krig.
Då, ingens slav och ingens herre vorden,
hvar odalbonde var en man för sig.

character and the loss of that primitive virtue which was once the pride of the Swedish race.

In the last canto of the *Frithiofssaga* (*Försoningen*) in which Tegnér brings about the inner conversion of his hero, the priest of Balder unites¹⁰ the salient virtues (i.e., strength, courage, etc.) of the Old Norse religion with the essential elements of Christianity (i.e., piety, love, forgiveness, etc.). Frithiof's heathen virtues are thereby naturally incorporated into and blended with these new ideals, which to be realized must be supplemented by the ancient, primitive virtues that alone lent to the ancient viking the quality of vitality and true heroism. Evidently in *Gerda* too Tegnér sought the same solution for his motif (i.e., the blending of the heathen with the Christian virtues), for Axel Hvide, who here is the spokesman of Christianity, clearly recognizes the true worth of Gerda's heathen virtues and realizes that they are the foundation upon which the new ideals of the Christian religion must rest. He says:

Denna Gerda, hur hon hatar
fridens lära, hur hon matar
Odens korpar i sin barm,
annars för allt ädelt varm!

There is something in Gerda akin to a Valkyrie in the majestic beauty of her warlike spirit, which is, however, tempered with chivalrous ideals. In her one is reminded of the heroic figure of Tegnér's *Charles XII* (1818) who represents the masculine ideal of Svea with drawn sword, but tender and noble at heart, that giant of a by-gone age to whom the poet listened as he told the story of Axel Roos and his Russian bride:¹¹

Der slog så stort ett hjerta,
uti hans svenska barm,
i glädje som i smärta
blott för det rulla varm.

¹⁰ "En barnlek blott är fromhet, ej förent med kraft."

¹¹ The meeting of Axel Roos and Maria has many points in common with that between Axel Hvide and Gerda. The two lovers are brought together accidentally; the maidens (Maria and Gerda) are both of a different race than their lovers; and both are described as possessing the same type of physical beauty (dark complexioned with sturdy limbs but refined and delicate contours)

In Gerda, as in Charles XII, there is that same self-reliant character, sublime courage and defiance of the enemy, which every true son of the North has inherited from the Viking Age:

Än i dag hvar Nordens son
kommer ej så lätt ifrån
jätten i sitt bröst, som pockar
jämt på sjelfbestånd och lockar
jämt till uppror eller knot
alla himlens makter mot.
Nordens kraft är trots, och *falla*
är en seger för oss alla,
ty förr än man föll till slut,
fick man ändå kämpa ut.

just as Tegnér says of Charles XII:

I med- och motgång lika,
sin lyckas öfverman,
han kunde icke vika
blott falla kunde han.

or of Frithiof (*Afskedet*):

Hur glad, hur *trolsig*, hur förhoppningsfull!
Han sätter spetsen af sitt goda svärd
på normans bröst och säger: *Du skall vika!*

As Axel Hvide contemplates these virtues in Gerda, he idealizes her in his love. Out from the inanimate beauty of the metal and rock (of which she is by nature a part) shines a soul undeveloped but untainted, the impersonation of a cruder but sounder and more virtuous age:

Hvarför skymtar Gerdas bild,
hög, men sällsam,—skön, men vild,
fram ur speglade metallen,
kikar utur bergkrystallen?
Vore hon allenast döpt!
Vore hennes själ blott köpt
från *de mörka makters skara!*
Gud må hennes själ bevara!

and as exerting a powerful sensual influence upon the surprised youth. It is possible that Tegnér retained in *Axel* an indistinct impression of that atmosphere which surrounded Axel Hvide and his meeting with the beautiful giantess.

To rescue such a soul from the sinister doctrines of revenge and hatred for the race of man was to be the crowning effort of the true Christian. "The dark powers" that beset her soul were exactly the same as harassed Frithiof and weighed upon him as a burden too heavy to bear, until the light of Christian love dispelled the darkness. Thus Frithiof cries out (*Frithiof på sin faders hög*):

Hvart nidings dåd, i vredens stund bedrifvet,
det är hans verk, är *mörka makters gärd*.

and again:

Tag bort din börda, jag kan den ej bära,
qväf i min själ *de mörka skuggors spel*.

Christianity was to bring light and consolation to the sinner (Frithiof) and to the heathen (Gerda).

Since Axel Hvide has not yet (i.e., in the first canto) entered the priesthood for the purpose of converting Gerda, his religious enthusiasm, especially in the portrayal of the cathedral at Lund, is rather surprising. But Tegnér has evidently invested his hero, just as he did Frithiof, with much of his own self. In describing the cathedral at Lund, the poet reveals the same ecstatic mood of pious veneration as he does in *Nattvardsbarnen*, or in the description of Balder's temple in the last canto of the *Frithiofssaga*. That Gerda is not in the least moved by this ecstatic apotheosis of the Christian ritual or by the outward expression of the esthetic side of the Christian religion is quite natural, since as a child of nature she cannot comprehend artificial beauty. An inward conversion is necessary, as in Frithiof's case, since she, like Frithiof, still believes in the heathen doctrine of revenge. The poet, then, most probably intended to portray a tragic struggle between the old and the new religion within Gerda's heart. Gerda's conversion would then necessitate, on the one hand, the entire devotion of Axel Hvide to the cause of the church and therefore his renunciation of all earthly pleasures, and on the other hand it would necessitate Gerda's renunciation of her sacred duty of revenge, which she had inherited from her father (Jätten Finn) and to which she devotes

herself with religious fanaticism until the time of her conversion. She thus sacrifices that which she holds most precious in life, just as does Ingeborg when she sacrifices her love for Frithiof's sake, or more exactly, as Frithiof does, when he sacrifices his *desire for revenge*, in order to be reconciled with God and thus to deserve Ingeborg's love on whose account he has offended God:

Ett offer vet jag, som är gudarna mer kärt,
än rök af offerbollar, det är offret af
ditt eget hjertas vilda hat, din egen hämnd.

Even if this theme of "renunciation in love" was intensified by some personal experience in Tegnér's life, as Schück and Warburg suggest,¹² the deeply religious significance of this theme seems to me consonant with Tegnér's literary ideals without any necessary connection with his personal love affairs.¹³ "Renunciation in love" is in itself only a part or a manifestation of the larger ideal of Christianity.

When we remember that the *Frithiofssaga* first took root in Tegnér's mind in the year 1819 and that he began *Gerda* in 1820 and then set this work aside possibly in order to finish the *Frithiofssaga*, it is not at all surprising that the two poems should have had a central theme in common. Aside from the love story, this theme involved the conversion of the chief character to Christian ideals, and not after the conventional and superficial manner of Oehlenschläger and the Romantic School but rather thru that inward process which should result in the redemption of character. No doubt Tegnér felt too that the conversion thesis might well be treated as a question of national import and that his own countrymen stood in

¹² Cf. *Illustrerad Svensk Litteraturhistoria*, Stockholm, 1897, II, p. 706: "Liksom Frithiof och Axel skulle äfven den hafva behandlat *försakelse i kärlek*. Pekar detta manne öfver på något själfupplefvadt? Äfven lyriska dikter från dessa år tyda på ett alltför lättörddt hjertas kval."

¹³ Sylwan in his article on the *Frithiofssaga* (*Edda*, X, 4, 1919, p. 216-217) has shown, for instance, how Tegnér's relations to Martina von Schwerin influenced the poet's conception of *Afskedet* and gave to the character of Ingeborg in this scene a much loftier tone than might perhaps otherwise have been the case.

sore need of "redemption." Gerda (Svea) should not forfeit her ancient virtues to the corrupting influence of politics and desire for luxury; Ancient Svea should be restored to life, but purified and chastened by Christian ideals. Thus the Gothic elements of the poem were to be welded into those larger qualities of Christian virtue, which transcend the limitations of any particular era. As in the *Frithiofssaga*, the poet evidently intended to present a picture of ancient Sweden (i.e., Scandinavia), but so blended with the ideals of our modern Christian era as to produce an idealized conception of the Swedish character.

The old folk legends centered about his beloved Lund were especially dear to Tegnér and these memories must have inspired¹⁴ him with the desire to convert an old legend into a story wherein the true or ulterior significance of the cathedral at Lund and of the Christian religion should be made real, just as Ibsen in his *Peer Gynt*, or Goethe in his *Faust*, fused into the old folk legend the eternal elements of truth and life.

We know from the plan of the poem which Tegnér has left us that he intended to extend the little picture about Lund

¹⁴ Cf. his poem *Klosterruinerna* (date not given but probably not later than 1805, Cf. F. Böök, *Esaias Tegnér* I, p. 64 ff.), where Tegnér expresses his desire to bring to life the old legends buried in the ruins of the cloister and mentions the story of Heloise (which he had planned to incorporate into his *Gerda*).

Se, tidens vishet åt legenden ler,
och tviflarns fötter på reliken trampa;
jag vördar, forntidsminnen, ännu er
och tänder åter er förtärda lampa,
* * * * *

Så, okänd Heloisa, småningom
hon tärdes af, blev bortdöd och begrafven,
och ingen Pope med sångens trolldom kom
att väcka hennes minne upp af grafven.

In the next to the last strophe of this poem Tegnér laments the fact that the old Gothic altar lies in ruins and there is no longer any Thor destined to return with his hammer and arouse (in the Swedish people) the old spirit of the viking warrior; a thought consonant with the theme in *Gerda* and in *Svea*:

Öch djupt förgömd bland fjällens skrefvor bor
den götiska, den blodbestrukna stoden,
ty på sin hammar soffer Asa-Thor,
och ingen kämpe gästar mer hos Oden.

into a large panorama of historical events during the 12th century, with a description of the principal historical personages of that period, such as Valdemar the Great, Saxo Grammaticus, etc. The figure of Gerda would thereby have become much more national than local and would have more nearly assumed that significance which the poet from the beginning probably intended for her, i.e., heathen Svea converted into the modern ideal of humanity.

The old race of giants had given way to a new era of life, but much that was splendid and heroic had also passed away. The union of these two phases of civilization, the best in both ages and in both religions, was evidently the ideal for which Tegnér was striving, i.e., the union of simplicity, strength and virtue with the Christian ideal of self-abnegation and devotion to a great cause. A similar blending of the old with the new as the ideal religion of the future Tegnér proclaimed in his masterful address upon Luther (*Reformations jubelfesten*, 1817). After comparing the virtues and failings of Luther's age with his own, Tegnér expressed the hope that the future age would combine the religious devotion of the Middle Ages with the love of truth and free thought, which characterizes our Modern Era. But after the close of the Napoleonic wars when the reaction against democracy set in, Christianity seemed to have failed; primitive man with his vicious instincts seemed to have gained the victory.¹⁵ Thus, in his poem *Jätten* of this same year ¹⁶ (1817) Tegnér cynically remarks concerning the primitive virtues:

"Hvad vill du med din oskuld,
du Emblas dotter?"
Se, uti trollets armar
har blomman vissnat.

¹⁵ Cf. the poet's sentiments as expressed in *Nyåret* (1816):

"Hejsan! Religionen är jesuit,
menniskorätt jakobin,
världen är fri, och korpen är hvit,
vivat påfven—och hin!"

¹⁶ Published in 1817, but no doubt written as early as the summer of 1812; cf. F. Böök, *Esaias Tegnér*, p. 451. The poem *Jätten* expresses Tegnér's contempt for the atheistic and materialistic doctrines which prevailed directly

When in his old age Tegnér returned to the legend of the giantess Gerda, it is quite possible that he intended "Embla's daughter" (i.e., Gerda) should preserve in all its freshness that flower "which had withered in the arms of the troll" (i.e., the savage instincts of human nature). Christianity alone could do this, and if in his poem *Jätten* Tegnér concludes that

Det onda är odödligt,
liksom det goda,¹⁷

we may infer that in *Gerda* the poet intended thru Gerda's conversion to Christianity to illustrate the truth, as in *Det eviga*, that

Det goda är odödligt,
liksom det onda.¹⁸

after the Napoleonic era. The spirit of the age is "the Giant," the friend of evil and the enemy of man, the hideous creature who in *Asatiden* drank to Loke's health out of human skulls:

I bergens salar satt jätten med trotsigt mod
och drack för Loke en skål ur människoskallar.

¹⁷ The whole poem *Jätten* expresses the pessimism of a sensitive spirit much in the same fashion as Schiller's *Die Worte des Wahns* which Tegnér translated (cf. A. Nilsson's *Introduction* to Tegnér's "Filosofiska och estetiska studier," p. 91 f.). The following passages from Tegnér's translation reflect the spirit of his *Jätten* ("Det onda är odölig liksom det goda"):

Så länge du tror på den gyllne tid,
der det rätta, det goda skall gälla.
Det rätta, det goda är födt till strid
och dess fiende kan ingen fälla.

Hon (lyckan) gifter sig med de onde blott
och den gode besitter ej jorden.

¹⁸ Cf. *Kulturen* (1805):

Lärd af Sekler skall en dag Kulturen.
(Sekler tala vishet i sin flygt)
Föra menskan åter till naturen
Från hvars sköt den henne fordom ryckt;
Icke mer en blodig gäst i öcknar
Men förädlad, lycklig, ren och god,
Sådan som en dag bland Kaos' töcknar
Hennes bild för Skaparns tanke stod.

In *Försonligheten* (1806) Tegnér likewise emphasizes the final victory of the good over evil:

Eröfrar det Onda all världen till slut,
din själ kan det Goda dock vilja.

Both the *Frithiofssaga* and *Gerda* grew out of Tegnér's ideal of representing Ancient Sveà in the light of modern culture, and as the national poet and the spokesman of Christianity in the realm of art, Tegnér might have produced in the completed form of *Gerda* a poem of national significance, fused with those ideals of virtue and humanity which characterized both his religion and his poetry. Tegnér was keenly disappointed when he found that his failing energies prevented him from completing this poem (along with other works which he had outlined, such as an epic poem on Charles XII and another upon Napoleon), and a reflection of this sentiment was clearly expressed in his touching poem *Afsked till min lyra* (1840):

Den dag skall komma, då utur min aska
en skald skall uppstå för att sjunga ut
i slag, som klinga, uti toner raska
hvad jag ej hunnit, förr'n min kraft tog slut,
hvad stort och ädelt i det nordanländska
som återstår ännu, det väldiga, det svenska.—

But the fragment *Gerda* still reminds us of the truth of Tegnér's own words (*Karl XII*, 1818):

Än bor i Nordens lundar
den höge anden kvar.

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